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NEWS RELEASE

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UM PROJECT CRAFTS UNIQUE WEB SITE ABOUT MONTANA TRIBES

MISSOULA -

A new Web site about Montana's Indian tribes that offers hours of video interviews with Native people, learning activities and other resources is now online at

<http://www.montanatribes.org>.

The site, which took a year to develop, was funded by the state Office of Public Instruction's Indian Education Division and The University of Montana. OPI and UM split the \$60,000 cost to build the site.

Montanatribes.org, an educational resource for citizens and teachers, was created by UM's Regional Learning Project, which produces multimedia educational products with American Indian educators about regional history. Project Director Sally Thompson said the new site, with its comprehensive look at all tribes in a single state, may be the first of its kind in the U.S.

"We don't know of anybody else doing this type of work, and if they are, we'd love to know who they are," Thompson said. "We have the advantage of having a major collection of tribal interviews to draw from."

These pre-existing interviews, conducted by Thompson since 2001, allowed them to produce the site for a more reasonable cost.

Thompson said she was motivated to create the public Web site by George Horse Capture Sr., a Gros Ventre elder from Fort Belknap now living in Great Falls. He told her that he had been interviewed many times over the years, especially while employed at the Smithsonian Institution, but, according to Horse Capture, the Regional Learning Project interview was the first time he felt he was given the opportunity to really share what he knew.

“He said, ‘You have a national treasure in that (video) collection. You should find a way to make it more accessible to the public,’” Thompson said.

Over the last eight years, working with videographer Ken Furrow, Thompson interviewed more than 100 tribal elders and educators from throughout the region, including every tribe in Montana. Some of the material was culled for a UM online graduate course for teachers titled Indian Education Leadership Training, developed by the Regional Learning Project and taught by Thompson, who thought it made good sense to expand the resource.

“People generally have such a limited exposure to the wealth of life of the various tribes in our region,” Thompson said. “This site introduces people to the diverse cultures of Montana.”

Kim Lugthart, the site’s developer and designer, said Montanatribes.org contains about 100 video clips that are generally two to three minutes long.

A “Meet the Speakers” section provides a brief biography of each of the Native experts, who address topics such as tribal diversity, cultural continuity, land and treaties, and sovereignty.

“In addition, we have direct links to each of the official Web sites of the tribes and the tribal colleges,” Lugthart said. “And we have a lot of content in PDF form, so people can print things out, including a content outline that lets people visualize how the entire site is laid out.”

The interview clips are organized around the Seven Essential Understandings Regarding Indians, which were developed by Montana tribes in 2000 under the direction of OPI. Essential Understanding 1, for example, states: There is great diversity among the 12 tribal nations of Montana in their languages, cultures, histories and governments. Understanding 3 discusses how traditional Native beliefs, culture and languages persist today. All the understandings are highlighted in the new site.

Other Essential Understandings address the treaties and federal policies that affected Indians in Montana such as termination, relocation and allotment. Thompson interviewed UM law professor Ray Cross, a Mandan-Hidatsa, to address the important subject of sovereignty.

Several online learning activities, developed by Lugthart, are included in the site. One of these activities is a game where players can drag the names of the state’s Indian reservations to the appropriate site on a Montana map.

In addition, the classroom resources page offers an hour and a half of video from three DVDs produced by Thompson for elementary school students. These longer resources are broken into chapters.

Montana is unique among U.S. states in that its constitution recognizes the cultural heritage of American Indians and is committed in its educational goals to preserving their cultural integrity. One of Thompson's favorite interviews on the new Web site involves Earl Barlow, a Blackfeet from Browning now living in Spokane, Wash., who introduced the idea of acknowledging the history and cultures of Montana's tribes in the state constitution. His efforts during the state's 1972 Constitutional Convention, assisted by many others, resulted in the inclusion of Article X, section 1(2) in Montana's Constitution.

"He's a humble man, so it was kind of like pulling teeth to get him to actually take credit for what he did," she said. "But it's great to hear firsthand about something that makes our state really special in this way. It's a story that really hasn't been told elsewhere."

That constitutional provision led to the 1999 Indian Education for All Act, which states all educational personnel should have an understanding and awareness of Indian tribes so they can teach about the first Americans in a culturally responsive manner. Thompson hopes Montanatribes.org will be a useful tool for teachers wishing to bring authentic Native voices into their classrooms.

"You know, people tend to speak in past tense about Indians," she said. "For example, they might say 'they believed' when talking about their spiritual beliefs. Well, no, they still believe it. Probably my biggest goal with this site is to get people to realize these beliefs and cultural values aren't gone. They are alive and well, as the interviews will show."

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